

Playing the Brussels game: Strategic socialisation in the CFSP Council Working Groups*

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Abstract:

The aim of this article is to analyse the process of socialisation taking place at the level of the Council Working Groups (CWGs) dealing with the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Based on recent empirical evidence, this article explains the main codes of conduct adopted by the national diplomats in the CFSP CWGs, such as the reflex coordination or consensus-building practice. Compliance with these rules stems from strategic calculations based on legitimacy concerns and the long-term perspective of the negotiations. Hence, in this case, the internalisation of norms has not taken place yet. Even though this view may suggest a conceptualisation of national representatives in the CWGs as passive “national champions”, it is argued here that they might also play a role in influencing the position of their capitals, mainly through the process of formulating the instructions.

Keywords: CFSP, external relations, Council Working Groups, diplomats, socialisation, strategic action, foreign policy, consensus building, coordination reflex, negotiations, code of conduct, governance

Introduction

Socialisation processes among national diplomats in Brussels were already identified in the early CFSP literature (de Schoutheete, 1980; Nuttall, 1992); nonetheless, an in-depth analysis about how socialisation takes place or what has been its impact on the policy-process or the policy-substance is still missing. This article aims, first, at establishing whether the socialisation argument is still valid nowadays, and second, at providing some empirical evidence regarding under which conditions this process occurs. Contrary to previous analyses, attention is paid to the lower levels of the decision-making system, i.e. the CWGs. It is argued here that they should not be underestimated since they play a significant role in the EU's Foreign Policy making.

This article also intends to join the discussion on the nature of the socialisation process taking place within the EU institutions. Socialisation has often been conceived as a process of internalisation of the rules and norms of a group, implying a switch from a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness. This article explores whether or not this has also been the case in the CWGs, where interactions occur among national representatives embedded in two environments: national and European one. In this case, the analysis is primarily concerned with the adaptation to the formal and informal rules of behaviour within the CWGs.

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The article is based on more than 70 in-depth interviews conducted by both authors in Brussels with national representatives to the CWGs and EU officials (Commission and Council Secretariat General) in 2005 and early 2006.¹ Some data comes also from an on-line survey conducted by the authors and filled in by 30 national representatives from 12 different CWGs. Overall, the research targeted diplomats from 20 Member States. The empirical evidence is complemented by participant observation in the CWGs meetings in 2005 and secondary literature.

The article begins with a discussion concerning the concept of socialisation, referring to the ongoing debate in the academic literature. It is then argued that in the case of the CFSP CWGs, strategic action appears as the main mechanism behind socialisation. The article then moves on to explain the institutional setting of the CFSP CWGs and continues with an analysis of the codes of conduct. Finally, the question of actors' legitimacy and credibility is raised. These factors are high at stake among national representatives, who take them into account in the long-term strategic planning of the negotiations. Finally, the article tackles the issue of misunderstandings/tensions between the officials in the capitals and in Brussels, which points to the role of the national representatives as change agents in national foreign policies.

Socialisation as a strategic action

The approach presented in this article adopts as a starting point the rational actor: even in highly institutionalised frameworks, rationality plays a crucial role in determining actors' behaviour. Actors are reflexive and take into account the social and normative context in which they find themselves when acting strategically. As it will be shown later in this article, national diplomats seconded to Brussels are not just shaped by the structure –i.e. they are not “structural idiots” (Beyers, 2005: 933)–, but they are also reactive and ‘self-reflective’. This means that they are able to interpret their own behaviour (Glarbo, 1999: 648). This article advocates a model which situates self-reflective actors within an institutional context. This standpoint underpins our understanding of socialisation processes in the CWGs.

In sociological analyses, socialisation has been conceptualised as a ‘*process by which social interaction leads novices to endorse expected ways of thinking, feeling and acting*’ (Johnston, 2001: 493).² This results in the establishment of a ‘*we-feeling*’ among the policy-makers and may lead to emergence of a common ‘role identity’ (Deutsch, 1957: 5-7). For the purpose of this study, socialisation is defined as adaptation of certain rules of behaviour, ‘ways of doing things’, stemming from interaction with members of the same group. This definition does not imply internationalisation of rules and norms at the very moment actors enter into the new environment or group.³ Instead, they start a process of learning the group's rules and simultaneously participate in the group's dynamics and legitimisation of appropriate behaviours. Only later, this process may result in the internalisation of the code of conduct. Such internalisation means ‘*taken for grantedness*’, so that the values and rules, ‘*are not only hard to change, but that the benefits of behaviour are calculated in abstract social terms rather than concrete consequential terms*’ (Johnston, 2001: 495). In other words, there is a switch from a logic of consequences to a logic of appropriateness (Checkel, 2005).

In a recent issue of *International Organization* (Fall 2005), the contributors distinguished two types of internalisation (Checkel, 2005). Type I Internalisation implies that actors follow the rules of the community or group in which they are embedded without reflecting on whether they are or not the right thing to do. Actors would be just playing the role that it is socially expected. Type II Internalisation will be a step further in the internalisation of rules and norms (ibid: 804). In this case actors adopt the rules of the group because they consider that these rules are the “right thing to do” which would imply a change in values and interests following a logic of appropriateness. The authors also identify three mechanisms for socialization: role playing, normative suasion and strategic calculation (ibid: 808). In the first one, actors adopt the norms because they are appropriate in this environment (leading to Type I internalisation). Actors are role-players and imitate the behaviour of other members in the group. When asked why they follow the procedural norms they would answer: “I don’t know, because that’s what the others do” (ibid: 811-812). As it will be argued throughout this article, this is not the case in the CWGs because national diplomats are self-reflective and when asked about why they adopt these norms they respond in terms of national interest. Nonetheless, exceptionally, when they arrive to the CWGs, national diplomats might mimic the behaviour of their colleagues simply because they lack the templates. As Johnston (2005: 1021) argues such behaviour, “*unlike strategic emulation, does not mean searching for and copying exemplars (...) It is rather a satisficing first step designed simply to be able to participate in the group by following its most basic rules*”.

In the case of the second mechanism, normative suasion sees actors as self-reflecting and engaging in communicative action to persuade others. This mechanism leads to Type II internalisation. When asked about why they follow the procedural norms they would answer: “because they are the right thing to do” (ibid: 812). If this type of internalisation occurred in the CWGs, we would observe that national diplomats follow the CWGs practices even when this would be in contradiction with their national positions and could lead to changes in national preferences.

Finally, in the case of strategic calculation, actors adopt the behavioural rules following social or material incentives. Strategic calculation does not involve internalisation of norms and hence actors follow the logic of consequences. Actors are strategic and self-reflective. When asked about why do they follow the procedural norms they would answer: “because I have to maintain my legitimacy and reputation within the group in order to better achieve my instructions” (ibid: 809).

In the CFSP CWGs, where arguably evidence of internationalisation of norms is still lacking, compliance with *cognitive scripts* can be better explained by strategic factors: long-term perspective of the negotiations and reputation. Before internalisation occurs, socialisation may be better perceived as a strategic action undertaken by actors, pursuing their interests and resulting from a rational cost-benefit calculations (that is, the strategic calculation mechanism in Checkel, 2005). This will be referred to in the article as *strategic socialisation*. Sociological accounts of socialisation have underestimated the strategic use of norms and practices (Checkel, 2005; Schimmelfennig, 2000: 135). The actors’ motivation to follow social pressures stems from the desire to maintain or improve their position within the group, as part of their long-term interest calculation. Legitimacy and reputation, factors contributing to one actor’s status in a group, become highly appreciated as they improve the

chances of getting the national interest reflected in the policy outcome. Credibility is particularly important in the case of iterated negotiations, such as those taking place in the EU, where frequent and repetitive contacts with the same group of officials occur. Such conceptualisation of socialisation does not exclude that in the long-term, especially when actors remain in the same group for long time periods, the behavioural rules become naturally done things (internalised). Nonetheless, the empirical evidence gathered in this research does not support the last point in the case of the CWGs.

Some scope conditions facilitating internalisation are identified by Lewis (2005: 945-947) to guide the empirical research, among them: insulation, the density of issues and low level of rotation. This article provides empirical evidence that the above do not occur in the case of the CWGs, what may explain the lack of internationalisation I or II. Contrary to what happens in COREPER (ibid: 945), meetings in the CWGs are not insulated. Some national representatives to the CWGs mentioned incidents where their colleagues had been reprimanded by their COREPER II, PSC ambassadors or the capitals. Even other external actors can have access to CWGs negotiations.⁴ This condition is linked with another one stated by Johnston: the degree of agent autonomy (2005: 1018). In those cases where there is an ample leeway, internationalisation is more likely to occur. National representatives in the CWGs have however relatively less margin of manoeuvre than their colleagues in COREPER.

The density of issues implies a high complexity and horizontal of the meeting agendas dealing with various policies such as in COREPER. In contrast, the experts in the CWGs deal with a narrower range of issues within a geographical or functional area. Moreover, the level of rotation of the national representatives to the CWGs is higher than in other Council bodies such as COREPER or PSC (ibid: 946). Regarding the last scope condition, the rotation levels, national diplomats participate in the same CWG for an average of 2-3 years, after which they might leave for another CWG or return to their capitals. This high rotation prevents internalisation of behavioural rules. However, when national diplomats remain for longer periods in the CWGs, they might internalise the norms as a “reflex” or “taken-for-granted habit, without any conscious act of persuasion” (Checkel, 2005: 811). Before proceeding with an analysis of socialisation, we briefly explain the institutional setting of the CWGs.

The CFSP Council Working Groups

The CFSP decision-making is often described as an intergovernmental process of hard bargaining among Member States. This view is usually based on analyses of CFSP at the high political levels such as negotiations at the European Council or the General Affairs and External Relations Council (GAERC) (e.g. Moravcsik, 1993). Later analyses have focused on the level of ambassadors, either COREPER or PSC (Lewis, 2005; Duke, 2005). However, these studies underestimate the role played by the CWGs in the EU’s foreign policy-making. A large part of the Council workload is already agreed at the level of the CWGs and it reaches the PSC and/or COREPER II as A points in the agenda.⁵ Thus, approximately 70 per cent of the total of the items in the GAERC agenda has been previously agreed in the CWGs and 15-20 per cent in COREPER (Duke and Vanhoonacker, 2006: 169). When considering these percentages, it has to be noted that decisions on more political or contentious issues

are reserved to higher levels, such as granting candidate status or nomination of the EU Special Representatives.⁶

With the Treaty of Maastricht, the former EPC Working Parties⁷ were merged with their communitarian counterparts, although some CFSP-specific CWGs remained. The role of the CFSP CWGs is to discuss and draft CFSP documents such as Joint Actions, Council Conclusions, Action Plans. The CWGs are composed of national representatives based in the Permanent Representations in Brussels. Having said that, it has to be noted that the CWGs also meet in “capital formations” composed by officials from the MFAs. In average, they meet twice per Presidency, however it depends on the CWG. For example, COWEB (Western Balkans) meets three or four times per Presidency, whereas COTRA (Transatlantic Relations) meets very rarely, not even once per Presidency.⁸ These “capitals” meetings serve to review the overall policy and raise specific issues, but no formal negotiations take place during the meetings. This article focuses on the first type of CWGs, composed by Brussels-based representatives.

There are thirty-six permanent CFSP CWGs that have been set following thematic (Transatlantic Relations, Non-Proliferation, United Nations, Human Rights) or geographical lines (Western Balkans, EFTA, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, Latin America). With the development of ESDP, new CWGs have been created such as the EU Military Committee WG. Moreover, two committees have been established, dealing with the military (EU Military Committee or EUMC) and the civilian aspects of the EU’s crisis management policies (Committee for Civilian Aspects of Crisis Management or CIVCOM). Apart from this, one can add two specialist CWGs: the Nicolaidis Group and the Antici Group, in charge of preparing the agenda of the PSC and COREPER II, respectively. Finally, the RELEX Counsellors WG is in charge of ensuring horizontal co-ordination between CFSP and communitarian matters.

Most of the CFSP CWGs meetings are held on a frequent basis, e.g. once or twice a week. Sometimes, the CWGs hold joint meetings to discuss cross-cutting issues, such as visa facilitation. At the level of the CWGs, there are also meetings of the Troika with third parties, such as the US, Canada or Russia. Not all of the CWGs share the same position in European foreign policy-making. As asserted by few practitioners, there is a feeling that the groups responsible for the most sensitive issues such as COTRA have a lesser say in shaping the policy than those responsible for other policies like COEST (Eastern and Central Asia) or COWEB. The ESDP committees (EUMC and CIVCOM) occupy an intermediate position between bodies at higher levels (COREPER II and PSC) and the CWGs. The EUMC, for example, is composed by senior officials from the MoD and disposes of its own preparatory body (the EUMC WG).

Looking back: socialisation in the CFSP literature

Socialisation of elites is present in the vast literature on the development of the EPC and later the CFSP. Different authors argued that as a consequence of repeated contacts and information exchange between the foreign policy makers, a process of socialisation emerged (Manners and Whitman, 2000; Nuttall, 1992, 2000; Smith, M.E., 2004; Tonra, 2001). Initially, a process known as the *co-ordination reflex* developed between the national diplomats. This was noted in the Copenhagen Report,

approved in 1973. According to the document, the habit of working together had become “*a reflex of coordination (...) which has profoundly affected the relations of the Member States between each other and with third countries*” (as quoted in Allen and Wallace, 1982: 26). The EPC brought together diplomacies “*in time and space on regular basis*” and as a result “*provided completely different terms for social integration between both national diplomacies and their individual diplomats*” (Glarbo, 1999: 640). As Nutall (1992: 312) observed: “*The (...) great success claimed for Political Cooperation is the phenomenon of socialisation. This is an automatic reflex of consultation brought by frequent personal contacts with opposite members from other Member States*”.

As a result from their participation in EPC/CFSP, national representatives were “*exposed to a spirit of cooperation and mutual understanding*” (Beyers, 2002), what some called *esprit de corps*. For his part, Tonra (2001: 261) asserts that even though there is no evident European policy identity, there is already a “*basic commitment and belief in joint policy-making*”. A national representative, referring to the *esprit de corps*, claimed: “*It does exist. People just know each other privately, invite each other for the meetings, also on private grounds, discuss various issues and some kind of community emerges... lets call it community of thinking or community of common views*”.⁹

Arguably, the club-like atmosphere described in the EPC and CFSP literature, still exists nowadays, after the last EU enlargement. Despite often expressed doubts, whether this *esprit de corps* would continue when more actors take a seat around the table, a majority of the interviewees claimed that the informal cooperation has actually increased after the enlargement. One of them stated: “*As there are now 25 states in the room, more is done outside, drafting is often done informally*”¹⁰ and in a similar tone, another one asserted: “*The enlargement process has strengthened the tendency to make all major decisions outside the formal meetings*”.¹¹ New Member States have quickly learnt the importance of informal contacts between the experts at CWG level¹². As stated by an official of the Polish MFA: “*We are learning some procedures. I am not talking about the formal aspects, because these are relatively easy to grasp. I am rather thinking of the skills to build informal coalitions, agreeing on positions in the corridors, in the early stage, in order to avoid clashes later on.*”¹³

One of the results of this *diplomatic intersubjectivity* has been the emergence of a common code of conducting foreign policy. Our recent empirical study on several external relations CWGs point to the existence and importance of such informal codes of practices that will be explained in the next section.

Code of conduct in the CWGs

A process of information sharing, so-called **coordination reflex**, provides the basis for the national officials’ work. As one of the diplomats has recently put it: “*If you don’t exchange information, you are nobody*”.¹⁴ Even though, this consultation has been labelled as a “reflex” in the CFSP literature, we argue in this article that actors do still take into account who do they share information with and for which purposes (i.e. they are self-reflective). This sharing-information is perceptible in the increase of communicative practices among the CFSP officials.¹⁵ Informal consultations prior to the meeting are part of every-day work of the representatives as

a means to facilitate consensus. In contrast, in these very rare cases where informal contacts are not so intense, cooperation and therefore, consensus is more difficult to be achieved. For instance, one national representative stated:

*“Because we meet in COTRA so rarely, we look at each other, but we keep our construction of Member States separated from the others. This psychological or symbolical element is probably very important in our work, in our games for the EU foreign policy making. But in the case of COTRA, we remain separated, we do look at each other, but suspiciously, (...) you don’t even find the mood for co-operation.”*¹⁶

Communicative practices take place through formal channels, such as the COREU Terminal System (CORTESY) or the mailing lists of the CWGs. Nonetheless, a large bulk of information-sharing is informal (for channels of socialisation see Box 1). The representatives remain in close contact through e-mails, mobile phones and frequent meetings that often occur in the corridors and over lunch. As one representative expressed it: *“I am trying to meet my colleagues on a frequent basis: during the group formal meetings, but also before and afterwards, during lunches and any other gatherings.”*¹⁷

Consultations might take place bilaterally, in a group formation or in the format of *confessionals* with the Presidency. During these informal negotiations, national representatives inform other colleagues about their positions, in particular “red lines”, or exchange other type of information that may help the decision-making process. They also undertake informal negotiations in order to achieve a compromise before the meeting. As a result, *“many issues appear ‘pre-cooked’ in the agenda, especially the sensitive ones”*.¹⁸ In some CWGs, so-called ‘like-minded’ groups, based on similar interests on certain issues, have been established in order to prepare beforehand their common line of action.¹⁹ During these informal meetings, attendants often arrange in detail the strategy for the next CWG formal meeting: when each of them would intervene, what they would say and how they would reply to other delegations. As a consequence, the formal meeting is reduced to a mere representation of these “roles”. The like-minded groups operate on a very informal basis and usually participants credit each other with trust. As an example of this may serve an incident, when a higher-ranked diplomat was denied access to the group on the grounds that it would *“infringe the group’s intimacy.”*²⁰

Box 1: Channels of socialisation:

- Regular Working Groups meetings in the Council once or twice a week.
- Extraordinary meetings of the Working Groups and additional formal social events.
- Informal meetings, with the Presidency, bilateral meetings or in a group (so called ‘like-minded groups’).
- Meetings on private occasions. The atmosphere in the group is often very ‘friendly’: group photos are taken at the end of presidencies, former group members stay in touch, visit each other, inform about personal issues even on the special group-mailing lists
- Networks of formal and informal communication; these vary from COREU messages, frequent contacts via phone to mailing lists.

This coordination reflex also implies a tendency to take others' views into account when formulating national positions (instructions). According to Ben Tonra (2001), many foreign policy-makers and CFSP officials acknowledged the fact that it became a natural reflex, i.e. they were taking into consideration what would be acceptable for their European partners, rather than simply what the national position, based on national interest would be. The reflex coordination would appear therefore as a habit, a *naturally done thing*, in contrast with rational calculations to pursue self-interested preferences. In other words, this would be an example of role playing by non-reflective actors (Checkel, 2005). However, the interviews conducted by the authors supported the argument that national representatives are self-reflective when adopting the rules of the CFSP CWGs. In the case of the co-ordination reflex, it is seen by the diplomats as a way to increase their chances in the negotiations and avoid isolation in the CWG. For example, according to a practitioner, "*obviously one cannot ignore the positions of twenty four other countries and also the Commission when formulating a statement – this is a starting point to avoid being left in isolation*".²¹

As a result of the increase of these communicative practices among national representatives, European states no longer feel threatened by sharing information with their European colleagues. On the contrary, they have multiplied their mutual exchanges. Some of them admit they even share selected sensitive information with their counterparts, in particular if it helps to reach a compromise. Such information includes for example circulating national instructions, security assessments or other political information on a strategic level.²²

Another code of conduct that has been identified in the CFSP literature is the **consensus building practice**. CFSP is subject to intergovernmental bargaining with states retaining their veto powers (with few exceptions). A national representative compared this with pillar I in the following way: "*I was before in the MFA, dealing with pillar I issues, where negotiations are much tougher and you are more prepared to loose something. But in CFSP you can always say no. And if you are really serious about your no, nobody can stop you from blocking it. But this is rarely seen*".²³ Interestingly enough, Member States do not usually make use of their veto power during negotiations; on the contrary, there is a general practice to 'keep everyone on-board' and to achieve consensus. According to one official, "*the most important thing is the readiness of everybody to contribute to a solution*" and another mentioned "*there is a very strong impulse to reach a compromise*".²⁴ The Member States' diplomats try to generate a broad agreement regarding the decision, so no Member State is excluded (decisions by QMV) or auto-excluded (resorting to constructive abstention). This is a two-way process because not only will the majority try to integrate the minority, but also the potentially isolated state will try to find supporters, instead of behaving unilaterally. In other words, "*you have to avoid isolation, especially if you are a small or medium size Member State*".²⁵

One of the main driving forces in the day-to-day CWGs practice is the search for agreement within the group. As stated by a diplomat "*there is always a pressure to get an agreement, if you don't get a result, you have nothing. (...) we have to achieve meaningful results, a result in substance*".²⁶ The national representatives often have a common interest in producing results at the end of the day, i.e. to be effective. Thus, it is not rare that at the final stages of a long meeting the pressure stemming from the

group and the Presidency is high for reaching agreement and not leaving any unsolved problem to be passed on to a higher political level.²⁷ Understood in these terms, effectiveness of the CWGs is usually high since according to practitioners and academics 90% to 95% of the issues in the agenda are agreed. The question here is why they follow this consensus-building norm. According to our findings, even when they give up on some issues, such consensus-oriented behaviour stems from their long-term calculus.

Final agreement can adopt different forms: a consensus formula accepted by all the Member States; a compromise formula or false compromise (different readings for different Member States of the same document); or even a formula listing all the different options.²⁸ However, it has to be noted that in a few CWGs this effect-oriented approach is lacking. This is the case in COTRA because of the highly politicised nature of the transatlantic relations. As mentioned before, the role of this CWG in EU's foreign policy is very limited and similarly, the interactions among their members,²⁹ which arguably would have limited the degree of socialisation among them.

Another principle is the existence of **domaines réservés**. These are issues that cannot be submitted to discussion and interference from the other Member States. Traditionally, these areas covered security issues (national defence, borders, nuclear status or neutrality) and special relationships. Sensitive issues are often kept out of the discussions in the CWGs and go straight to the higher level. That was the case with the negotiations on the common space on security with Russia which was only discussed at the PSC.³⁰ On the other hand, a member of a group dealing with transatlantic relations pointed out that any politically 'hot' matters in EU-US relations, such as Iraq, were always kept out of the discussions.³¹ Other examples of issues that will not be discussed in the CWG given by the national diplomats included: broader co-operation between EU-NATO (in the EUMC WG); agreement on money laundering with Switzerland (in the EFTA WG); Ukrainian EU membership (in COEST), institutional matters; borders and bilateral issues of the EU Member States.³²

There are also more detailed rules of behaviour and often their breaching is perceived by others as 'inappropriate', leading to a decrease in one's credibility in the group (see next section). These are the rules referring to the manner of presenting instructions, courtesy towards other group members or the language used. They include, for example:

- Vertical and horizontal consistency: no contradicting in the CWG the position taken before on a higher level, not opening the issues previously closed in the CWGs on a higher political forum and definitely not contradicting the positions on different forums. As one of the representatives put it:
*"You have to say the same things in different fora (...) Horizontally, but also vertically. You have to be able to say the same thing at the technical and at the political level. What you say has to be the same that what your Minister says at the Council or your Prime Minister at the European Council. It is not easy, and you have sometimes countries that do not say the same thing at different levels. This is badly perceived. It means that you are not serious, that your system does not work".*³³

- When instructions are considered by the representative to be ‘difficult to justify’ within the group, they would usually resort to the phrase “according to my instructions...” or “according to my capital...”.³⁴ This is an *informal sign* to other group members, contrary to beginning your contribution with “We think...”.
- Maintaining “positive” relations with other representatives and trying to avoid direct clashes of positions in the CWG are other informal practices. An official mentioned that “*it’s very important to have emotional intelligence and of course, not to disturb the others. If you disturb the atmosphere in the group (...) you will not find a constructive attitude*”.³⁵ This positive working atmosphere is crucial to facilitate consensus-building.
- Members of the CWGs have to respect the policy that had been agreed previously in the Council Conclusions. For instance, according to one practitioner: “*you don’t argue with the so-called agreed-language, the EU’s agreed policy established before. You cannot say now ‘I don’t agree with the Thessaloniki agenda’*”.³⁶
- Other rules can help to protect your legitimacy and reputation, for example, “*there is a rule of not expressing the radical position, if there are other radicals in the group*”,³⁷ i.e. hiding behind their back.
- Similarly, it is in good practice to seriously consider Commission’s proposals as well as the deals proposed by the Presidency.

Who cares about legitimacy and credibility in the CWGs?

National representatives learn the ‘code of conduct’ and apply it in their everyday work. As mentioned above, it is often a *strategic* action, aimed at strengthening one’s position in the group and raising the chances of success in the future. From this perspective, adoption of the group’s rules is a tactical move, a sort of negotiation strategy, employed in order to achieve their goals and not because it is “the right thing to do”. It is due to the fact that legitimacy and credibility within the group are high at stake among the national representatives in the Council. As claimed by one of them, “*credibility is something you gain if you are constructive in the discussions*”.³⁸ Another one added in a similar tone: “*Here, we have to join the play that is performed. Either we will have a role in it, or we will just be extras. If we want to play a role, we have to join the consensus as often as possible. This is how we build our position*”.³⁹

One diplomat referred to two types of credibility in the Council: both personal and country’s credibility. Independently from the state’s credibility, once the position of the diplomat within the group is strong, it is generally perceived easier to negotiate and make one’s voice heard. In this situation increasing personal credibility is good for the country’s general effectiveness. Nonetheless, in some situations a representative is entrapped in a difficult position, where the two credibilities are in conflict. As one of them described such situation in which he is obliged to present instruction that has no chance of succeeding:

“It is difficult to present instructions, knowing people around the table and knowing what they think about it. (...) Why should I make a fool of myself? What people do then, they say something like: I have here such instructions (...) and I am obliged to read them out... In this way, they protect themselves but not their countries.”⁴⁰

This example also shows that on some occasions, individual diplomats might internalise the behavioural procedures and only reluctantly break the code of conduct, for the sake of their national position. This is due to the fact that they are embedded in two environments, the Brussels one and the capital one. The capital factor is a very important one since national representatives are watched from their MFAs and they have to report back. In sum, they have to be effective in their role in Brussels.

Eventually, for the practitioners, it all comes down to *‘having your amendments approved’*, which is a sign that your strategy works.⁴¹ The credibility determines the effectiveness of the representative, and can be a chance for smaller Member States to have a stronger impact on policy-making. As one diplomat claimed: *“You have representatives from small Member States that can make a huge impact on and you have representatives from big Member States (...) that in spite of the size of their country do not influence the negotiations”*.⁴² An example was given of a diplomat from Portugal in COWEB who influenced the negotiations helping to build the consensus. Another example is one of a Danish representative in PMG, who was an active player, even though his country has an opt-out in defence issues.

A representative may however lose his/her credibility within the group by breaking the code of behaviour. This can happen as a result of trying to force a position that is very radical or simply *‘unforceable’*, which is badly perceived by other group members. Hence, *‘later on, whatever you say, even if these are the best ideas, they are ignored in silence... That is why I have to build my position. Everyone has to know I am pragmatic and ready to negotiate’*.⁴³ The representatives take into account the long-term results of the negotiations and are sometimes ready to make minimal concessions in their national short-term preferences. Nonetheless, this is done only if it improves their overall standing within the group and increases the chances of success regarding more important issues. This was described by one representative as the ability to *‘sacrifice an ill-perceived or short-term national interest in order to invest in long-term capacity that can be used in more important issues’*.⁴⁴

Different perceptions between Brussels and the capitals: who writes instructions for whom?

A crucial question to be asked regards the position that the representatives want to achieve. Is it the original national position or has it been modified by their interactions in Brussels? As one of the diplomats admitted: *“This is the first lesson that you learn when you come to Brussels: the toughest negotiations take place between the capital and Brussels”*.⁴⁵ The representatives emphasize the difference between the perceptions of officials in Brussels and those in the capital, which occasionally leads to discussion over the instructions or convincing the capital that the instructions should be changed for the sake of the state’s credibility in the group.⁴⁶ In such cases they argue that the national position is not *‘quite in tune with the negotiating atmosphere here in Brussels’*.⁴⁷ As one of them observed, this does not mean losing one’s effectiveness: *“I am perceived in a better light and hence my next*

ideas are taken into account, whereas if I am perceived as a troublemaker, who spoils the atmosphere and asks for impossible, they are omitted".⁴⁸ This was also a lesson learnt by the representatives of the new Member States, who, as observed by their counterparts *"make things softer, they gained some confidence and friendship with other colleagues and so they feel confident to present things less radical than their capitals might wish, but at the end they get more results"*.⁴⁹ In this way, national diplomats are able to use their expertise and institutional position to influence not only European politics and decision making, but also their foreign ministries (Spence, 2002: 33). They see themselves as the "transmission belts" of every day business in Brussels to their capitals.⁵⁰

The tension experienced by the national representatives is due to the fact that they are embedded in two social environments: domestic and European (Beyers, 2002; 2005). The code of conduct associated with the latter is learnt after their arrival in Brussels and the first one (national) is subsequently modified. The diplomats sometimes act as 'change agents' in relation to their own national administration. The process starts during their stay abroad, but the influence can be exerted even stronger after their return to the capitals (the so called 'contagion' effect; see Page and Wouters, 1995: 197).⁵¹ In this way, they take an active part in the process of Europeanisation of national foreign policies in both directions: national adaptation and promoting national policy goals on the European level. Those capital officials that spent even a few weeks training in Brussels claimed that it allowed them to see the work of their colleagues from different perspective and to understand better what was expected from the capital. Those that left the capitals and started working in Brussels felt the growing gap between themselves and their colleagues from the ministry. One of them observed that in Brussels *"everything changes faster, when it comes to the mentality of the diplomats"* and that the people in the capital *"become frustrated, as they feel that we are getting further away and then the lack of understanding appears"*.⁵²

There are different ways of influencing the actual substance of instructions. Some diplomats admit that on some occasions they are not given any precise instructions: *"I am very happy when I don't have instructions. Generally, when I receive instructions, I am much more constrained in achieving result"*.⁵³ Depending on organizational structure and the strength of representative's own position within it, they make sure their instructions are what they would like to receive. As one official clarified: *"What I do is write instructions for myself. I write to [the capital] what I am going to do, what I am going to say and unless I get something different, I will proceed with this line"*.⁵⁴ Several of the representatives from both, new and old Member States emphasized there was nothing worse than receiving *"stupid"* instructions with *"crazy ideas"*, which send them *"to die"* or *"kill themselves"* *"with an instruction which is completely out of the point"*.⁵⁵ Therefore, some of them admit they act early to prevent receiving such instructions. Nonetheless, there are also possibilities of negotiating the changes during the meetings of the CWGs. It is a common practice that the representatives either take phone calls quietly in the negotiation room or leave for a few minutes. The "flexibility" of instructions and the freedom given to the representatives varies among the Member States. For example, the Germans, Austrians and Swedish are usually mentioned as examples of diplomats with less room for manoeuvre.

The diplomats emphasize that the capitals lack an overall feeling about the atmosphere in the CWG and experience regarding to what position has chances of getting accepted and what arguments to use in order to convince the others. Even though the officials from the capitals attend occasionally the meetings of the CWGs in the so-called capital formations, the atmosphere in such meetings is completely different. The representatives based in Brussels would usually also accompany the capital official, taking a seat behind. Reports from the CWGs meetings play an important role as to early warning about possible conflicts, signalling the positions of others as well as the most important themes for national interest. It is also worth mentioning that the representatives of the CWGs attend the points relevant to their work at the meetings of PSC or COREPER II, advising their ambassadors. Hence, their role is not finished when the dossier leaves the level of experts.

Concluding remarks

This contribution offered some insights into the nature of socialisation process at the level of experts in the CWGs. Socialisation has been widely perceived in the extant CFSP literature as internalisation of norms, missing possible rational motivations behind this process. This research however points to the fact that in the case of the CWGs socialisation has mainly followed a strategic calculus. It also served to emphasise the relevance of the lower-levels of the decision making system in the European foreign policy. In spite of the technical nature of the issues discussed in the CWGs, they still exert an impact on the direction of the EU foreign policy. A large bulk of the CFSP workload, such as drafting of Council Conclusions, is already agreed at this level and simply “rubber stamped” by higher Council bodies. On the other hand, national representatives not only play an important role as their capitals’ voices in Brussels, but also influence their masters in the Ministries. This is done through the process of formulating the instructions, which is based on a continuous dialogue with the capital.

The article also identified the main practices constituting the code of conduct, supported with recent empirical evidence. The behavioural rules presented here include for example: reflex coordination, consensus building, domaines réservés, and maintaining consistency between different levels of decision-making. These rules are learnt as a result of diplomats’ participation in the CWGs. Non-compliance may damage the legitimacy and credibility within the group, which may decrease the chances of influencing the final outcome.

The empirical evidence supports the argument that in most of the cases internalisation of behavioural rules within the CFSP CWGs has not occurred. Instead, the code of conduct has been applied as a part of a strategic calculus, in which legitimacy and credibility (of their own and of their countries), as well as the long-term perspective of the negotiations, played a crucial role. An important factor explaining why the rules have not been fully internalised might be the fact that the diplomats are embedded in two logics. The first one comes from their capitals, whereas the second one is learnt upon their arrival to Brussels. This element is also shared with the representatives in other Council bodies such as COREPER (Lewis, 2005). However, in the case of CFSP CWGs, the national allegiance is stronger due to the high levels of rotation. The shadow of the capital is always present.

Yet, it is worthy to note some methodological challenges when trying to apply theory into practice and conduct empirical research on socialisation. It is difficult to prove whether the norm has been internalised or merely followed strategic calculations. If we just rely on the discourse in order to trace the utilisation of norms, we immediately face the question: do actors believe in what they say? Are they just engaged in rhetorical action? As it seems an impossible task to ‘get into people’s heads’, many academics limited their research to a discourse analysis, pointing out the importance of the language used. We argue here that while such analysis is important, it should be complemented by other methods. These include process tracing, elite in-depth interviews⁵⁶ and questionnaires. The interviews should be ideally conducted prior the entry into a group and at a later stage, when actors have already spent some time in the new environment.

On the other hand, variation in degrees of socialisation may be explained by different variables, such as the impact of previous socialisation experiences (at their MFAs/participation in other multilateral fora); the length of time he/she has been a member of the group, different national administrative cultures and trainings or even personal characteristics. Therefore, more comparative research is needed to examine socialisation affecting officials from different Member States and from different CWGs.

The final question to be raised is whether the findings of the article bring us any closer to understanding the impact of different types of socialisation on 1) the policy process and 2) the outcome of the European foreign policy. As regards the first issue, socialisation has arguably changed the dynamics of the negotiation process. This is particularly visible in the adaptation process experienced by the newcomers after the last enlargement. The representatives from the new Member States have learnt to respect the code of conduct and hence a deadlock in the decision-making process has been prevented. They became less radical in presenting their positions; they seek the approval of their colleagues even before the formal meetings and resort to “EU values” to present their positions. Moreover, further research could look at the links between governance and the context of negotiations. For instance, how the enlargement, by increasing informal practices, also brought changes in modes of governance leading for example to more deliberative type negotiations, instead of bargaining-oriented ones.

The impact on the policy outcome is more subtle. Because of the consensus oriented behaviour the final result is not just a lowest common denominator. As a result of the coordination reflex, national policies are formulated under different conditions what may also have an impact on their actual policies. For example, some Member States (in particular, small Member States) have gained access to more information from their partners what can lead to shifts in preferences or even help to formulate positions in those cases where they did not have one before. In sum, the article could serve as a starting point for a new research agenda that should start questioning the conception of socialisation as it has been understood in previous research on CFSP.

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² In the CFSP literature, it has been defined as a force shaping 'the practices, perceptions and interests of policy makers', including any possible redefinition of self-interest' (Manners, Whitman, 2000: 7-8).

³ Socialisation has to be also distinguished from the concept of Brusselisation (Allen, 1998: 54). The latter only refers to the physical transfer of the decision-making from the capitals to Brussels-based bodies. As such, Brusselisation does not exclude socialisation and often facilitates it. In contrast, Nuttall (2000) argued that Brusselisation could eventually obstruct the "reflex coordination" and the "club-like atmosphere" by increasing the number of actors and bureaucratization of the CFSP.

⁴ According to one practitioner, "if you think you are talking just to the 25 Member States then you are mistaken. If you are mentioning a specific country there is 99% chance that it will reach them, even the same day". Interview in Brussels.

⁵ The "A" points in the GAERC agenda are points that have been already agreed in lower levels and they are just "formally" approved by GAERC without discussion. The "B" points are the issues on which the Foreign Ministers will have to concentrate to get an agreement.

⁶ For example, although there were some discussions in COWEB (Western Balkans WG) about potential candidates for the post of the EU Special Representative in BiH, this decision could not be taken at the level of the CWG since it also involved negotiations with the Peace Implementation Council. Interviews in Brussels.

⁷ There is some confusion in the literature regarding the terminology. The term Working Parties, according to Nuttall (2000: 249), was used with reference to the EC preparatory bodies, whereas Working Groups was used in the context of the EPC. They were merged with the establishment of a single institutional framework (Treaty of Maastricht), officially known as Standing Working Parties. However, both terms are in common use among the practitioners and the academics. In this article the term Working Groups is preferred.

⁸ According to one interviewee, the last two "capitals" meetings have taken place in November 2004 and in February 2006 respectively.

⁹ As another representative claimed: *“There is a kind of family atmosphere in a group, I probably spend more time with my group colleagues than with the other representatives from my country”*. Interviews in Brussels.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ On-line survey on Council Working Groups.

¹² Some diplomats from new Member States were surprised by the process of socialisation taking place at the CFSP level and would even considered it as “not the right” way of doing business in the international organisation (e.g. one of them was struck by the habit of addressing national representatives by the Presidency using their names rather than countries they represented). Interviews in Brussels.

¹³ Interview in Warsaw.

¹⁴ Interviews in Brussels.

¹⁵ According to the on-line survey conducted by the authors, 17.9 % of the representatives to the CWGs always consult with other national delegations prior to formal meetings, and 71.4 % consult most of the time.

¹⁶ Interviews in Brussels.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ On some occasions, these like-minded groups are very structured, like in the case of COWEB. In other cases, these groups vary depending on the issue for discussion (for example, CIVCOM or COEST).

²⁰ Interviews in Brussels.

²¹ Ibid.

²² On-line survey on Council Working Groups.

²³ Interviews in Brussels.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ According to a CWG official, the CWGs should not send to higher levels texts with technical square brackets, which means that you do not have an agreement because of time pressure or lack of information. This would be a signal of lack of effectiveness. Interviews in Brussels.

²⁸ Interviews in Brussels.

²⁹ As stated by a national diplomat: *“These informal exchanges are not so important in COTRA because of the lack of this effect-oriented approach”*. Interviews in Brussels.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ On-line survey on Council Working Groups.

³² Ibid.

³³ Interviews in Brussels.

³⁴ Several confidential interviews in Brussels confirmed that practice.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid. Another one added in a similar tone: *“I realized that since you start to be integrated within the group, since you start to be constructive, to be active, to make proposals, to be on the lead of things, instead of wait and see (...) then your credibility grows”*.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Interview in Brussels. In their report from the ongoing research project Heinisch and Mesner (2005: 15) examining the culture of COREPER negotiations refer to the “dual loyalty” of Permanent Representatives (PermReps). They argue that it is stronger in COREPER than in other bodies, since the PermReps have to defend not only the national position, but also serve the European idea. In a similar line to what is argued in this article, they claim that apart from negotiation success, the “willingness to compromise and work on joint solutions is equally important for acting successfully in COREPER and for gaining the respect of their colleagues” (Heinisch and Mesner 2005: 16).

⁴⁶ Some evidence of similar nature were found by Lewis (2005) and Heinisch and Mesner (2005) in case of COREPER negotiations.

⁴⁷ Interviews in Brussels.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Jeffrey Lewis (2005: 940), analyzing socialisation in COREPER, observed “the cognitive blurring of sharp definitional boundaries between the ‘national’ and ‘European’ frames and a shared sense of responsibility to deliver both home and collectively”. This, he claimed, led to complex identity changes. Hence, “COREPER’s Janus-like design is an anomaly for theorists who draw rigid distinctions between ‘national’ and ‘supranational’ agency” (Lewis, 2005: 967).

⁵¹ On the other hand, some argued that the effects of socialisation process in Brussels, on example of COREPER, can be “undone” (Lewis, 2005: 968).

⁵² Interviews in Brussels.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Unfortunately, interviewing diplomats poses several practical problems. The rotation in Working Groups is high, with people being moved between capitals and Brussels. Getting an access for conducting such in-depth, repetitive, usually long-lasting sociological analysis, keeping track of the changing group’s members, would require a long-term project.